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THE MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN

MADERA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY

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THE STORY OF THE FIRST J. WALTER SCHMITZ AND FAMILY

Many of the stories of people and places recorded in the Madera County Historian are a result of suggestions from some of the members of the Madera County Historical Society or some resident of Madera County who feels a story should be written about a certain family or incident related to Madera County history. Such is the case in the story we are relating in this issue.

Gathering the data was no problem, information was forthcoming from several sources. An excellent biography of J. Walter Schmitz I was found in "History of the State of California and Biography" by J. M. Guinn, 1905, many old newspapers, and best, of course, was a conference of several hours with Mrs. Sue Schmitz of Madera, daughter-in-law of J. W. Schmitz I and wife of the late J. W. Schmitz II. Mrs. Schmitz has many photos, letters, newspaper items and, of course, first-hand information on the Schmitz family. One of the finest items in the Schmitz collection are the letters written by Henry Miller to J. W. Schmitz I.



J. WALTER SCHMITZ



MARY VAN LEYEN SCHMITZ

John Walter Schmitz I was born in Germany, April 14, 1846. He was the son of F. P. Schmitz, a gunsmith for Emperor Frederick William. J. W. Schmitz I came to the United States with his parents in 1854, settling in Detroit, Michigan. His mother and father passed away in the late 50's. He was one of a family of seven children.

Mr. Schmitz completed his education in the Detroit City Schools, and being a venturous person decided to seek his fortune elsewhere; first going to Atchison, Kansas for a short time, then really became daring and drove six yoke of oxen across the plains to Salt Lake City, a journey that took three months. He became a wagon train clerk, this time for

Forbes Brothers and went with them to East Bannock Mines, now Montana, where he worked in the mines. Still seeking new fields of interest, in 1862 he journeyed to Virginia City, Montana, where he worked in the mines for about five years. In 1867, Mr. Schmitz journeyed on horseback to Walla Walla, Washington, then on by steamer down the Columbia River to Portland and on to San Francisco by water.

Not satisfied yet, he went to Calaveras County, California, engaging in quartz mining for ten months near a small place called West Point. This did not prove successful, so he moved on again. This time to Santa Clara County and to a real change in work, becoming a bridge builder for the old San Francisco and San Jose Railroad Company, later called the Coast Lines. He remained with this company until they sold out to the Southern Pacific Railroad Company. Mr. Schmitz settled in San Jose and did carpenter work for some time.

In April 1871, J. W. Schmitz, at the age of 25, entered the employ of Miller and Lux Co., working as a fence builder on the Santa Rita Ranch located not far from the Los Banos and the Dos Palos area.

Fence building in those days was not an easy occupation, but soon he was in charge of the entire fence building for the ranch. It seems from the very beginning of his career, anything he set out to do he did and did well. His ability was recognized and in 1873 he was made Superintendent of the Santa Rita Ranch. He immediately saw need for improvements and during his first year the canal was built through that great estate and thus began the Santa Rita Canal. (Mrs. Lillian E. Christiana, formerly of Madera, lives on the Santa Rita Ranch now.)

In 1874 Mr. Schmitz went back to work as a fence builder, working on the east and west sides of the valley and in Santa Clara and Monterey Counties, also superintended the building of the Chowchilla Canal. He was superintendent of this canal for years. Mr. Schmitz was somewhat of an inventor, making a headgate that proved very successful, one that answered all requirements and permitted great changes in farming methods. During the next two years we hear of him as being very active in developing irrigation on both sides of the valley and at Los Banos he began raising alfalfa as an experiment. Much of the development of the Los Banos and Firebaugh areas was due to his untiring efforts in promoting irrigation. (The reader should keep in mind the vast acreage of Miller and Lux, so you can visualize the territory they covered in overseeing this huge enterprise.)

In 1879 Mr. Schmitz had charge of a part of the Dos Palos Ranch until 1884 when he began to work the Poso Ranch in a systematic and scientific manner. He raised alfalfa, also bred and raised stock of all kinds, and at that time he was also advisory manager of the Santa Rita Ranch and supervised grain farming in Madera County.

Due to Mr. Schmitz's association with the Poso Ranch, he was known over the valley as "Posey" Schmitz.

The Poso Ranch was one of Henry Miller's headquarters. He spent considerable time here, and had his own room that was always ready for him. The ranch was located east of Firebaugh.

Mr. Schmitz made his home at this ranch for over 25 years. This home was large and well built.

While at the Poso Ranch he worked very closely with Henry Miller, receiving many letters of instruction from him. Mrs. Sue Schmitz has in her possession a most valuable collection of these letters, bound in an office file book. There are about 200 letters, dating from 1897 to 1902, including the original letters plus typed copies (The late Cyrus Swift, father of Dr. Coe T. Swift of Madera, was the timekeeper on the Poso Ranch at that time.)

In reading these letters you can readily understand why Henry Miller was a successful landholder. He seemed to know every move far in advance. He wasted nothing. All through the letters runs a thread of trust and faith in J. W. Schmitz. They seemed to have a thorough understanding. Frequently Miller asks in his letters for an opinion on a new step or on the character of a certain person and he indicates that Schmitz's reply will be helpful to him.

Later Mr. J. W. Schmitz bought the E. W. Chapman Ranch, also called the Grove Farm, located in the general area of where Alpha School is today. The house is no longer standing. He also owned the Howard and Wilson ranches, making a total of about 6,000

acres. He raised grain, alfalfa and fruit, always seeking ways to produce better crops.

There is so much that could be written about a man with so many interests and abilities, but our space does not permit lengthy stories.

So far we have not mentioned the family of J. W. Schmitz I. On Feb. 11, 1886, in Detroit, Michigan, he married Mary Van Leyen, born in Detroit. Her parents were from Dusseldorf, Germany.

Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Schmitz I had one son, J. W. Schmitz II.

J. W. Schmitz I passed away on July 25, 1910, at the age of 64. He was a member of the Masonic Lodge, first in Merced, then later he joined in Madera as a charter member. Also, he was a stanch Republican. Mrs. Schmitz passed away on Feb. 13, 1950, at the age of 95. Both are buried in the Calvary Cemetery in Madera.

The home originally known as the Chapman Ranch passed on to the son, J. Walter Schmitz II. After the death of the father, the son at the age of 24 continued farming and taking part in many community activities, particularly anything related to irrigation and farm problems.

He went to school for a time in Firebaugh, a very short time in Madera, then on to Santa Clara Preparatory School, and then graduated from Santa Clara University. J. W. Schmitz II went on to Davis, University of California, earning a M. A. degree there in Agriculture, Vitaculture and Animal Husbandry.

J. W. Schmitz II was married in 1914 to Mrs. Sue Barkwill Mallory in the home of the bride's mother, Mrs. Benninger. (Of interest to many of our readers: Brooke Mordecai was best man and the wedding took place in the home now occupied by Dr. Butler.) Mrs. Schmitz came from Virginia to California.

The couple started their married life in the old Chapman or J. W. Schmitz ranch home. Many improvements were made to the famous old house.

In 1931 the old home place was sold to R. M. [illegible]ress of Fresno, who planned to put the entire 400 acres into cotton.

J. W. Schmitz II then purchased the Thomas Desmond place formerly owned by Jack Daulton, father of H. Clay Daulton. Thomas Desmond and family lived there for some time. Mr. Desmond was killed by a bull. Thomas Desmond was the father of the late Frank Desmond. This property is located at 11793 Road 26½. Mr. Schmitz carried on extensive farming operations from here, over 5,000 acres at one time. The old Desmond home was remodeled and is now occupied by J. W. Schmitz III family.

Mr. Schmitz II was especially interested in the irrigation and water problems of the county and was elected Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Madera Irrigation District in 1921. In reading an issue of the Madera Daily Tribune of March 3, 1921, we note the reorganization of the board with J. W. Schmitz II elected Chairman; Walter C. Maloy, Secretary-Manager; N. E. Sanders, W. H. Benson, J. B. High, and J. L. Davis, Directors. We found article after article in copies of the Madera Daily Tribune describing in detail the struggle that these dedicated men went through in their desire to secure an adequate water supply for the County. We found a copy of the Fresno Morning Republican of July 24, 1921, with pictures of the proposed dam on the San Joaquin River near Friant; of the five Directors; of Millerton; and the river. The story states that Madera County would vote on the bond issue of $28,000,000 to build the dam. We cannot go into detail on the story. We are just bringing to the reader the sincere interest of J. W. Schmitz II in the early stages of the creation of this great water project, which today we enjoy very calmly, not realizing what went on before in order that this dam could become a reality.

Items from a 1922 Detroit, Michigan, paper tell of Mr. Schmitz II visiting relatives in that city and that he was on his way to Washington, D. C. to confer with Secretary of Agriculture Wallace on matters related to Friant Dam.

One very exciting issue of the Madera Daily Tribune of August 23, 1922, tells of three Board of Directors resigning due to difficulties regarding contracts with Miller and Lux in which a compromise or satisfactory agreement could not be made. Schmitz, Sanders and Davis resigned, stating that with replacements perhaps a decision could be reached which would be satisfactory to those involved. The entire front and last pages of the Tribune were devoted to the story.

These items are mentioned that readers may appreciate the hard work of many sincere men that made it possible for Madera County to become the agricultural area it is today.

J. W. Schmitz II was the founder and second President of the Rotary Club of Madera and a charter member. When he visited Detroit, Michigan, in 1922, he attended a Rotary meeting and resolved then that Madera should have the benefits of the Rotary way of life and service.

He was active in the Madera County Farm Bureau and was a Past President. Mr. and Mrs. Schmitz were active in the social life of the community also. Mr. Schmitz was an accomplished singer and in our research through old Madera Tribunes, we read of community events when he sang a solo or was a part of a vocal quartet.

Two children were born to Mr. and Mrs. J. Walter Schmitz II: Jane, now Mrs. B. M. Sumpter living in Pasadena, and J. Walter Schmitz III, at present an active member of the community, a successful farmer, and at this date, Chairman of the Madera County Board of Supervisors. J. W. Schmitz III, his wife Betty and two children, Sue and J. W. Schmitz IV, live on the home place now. J. W. Schmitz III served in the Navy during World War II, and sister Jane was a WARD stationed in Hawaii. Eugene Mallory, son of Mrs. Schmitz by a former marriage is also a part of this well known family.

J. Walter Schmitz **II** passed away after a heart attack on May 31, 1949, at the age of 63.

Mrs. Sue Schmitz, his widow, lived on at the home place until recently when she moved into Madera.

The story of two generations of the J. W. Schmitz family has been told rather briefly. However, it will give the reader an understanding of this fine family and their contribution to Madera County through the period 1871 to 1949.

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Facts Gleaned From Here and There
(Too late to include in main story)

Mr. Jack Daulton planted the eucalyptus trees along Madera Avenue on out to the place which today the home of J. W. Schmitz III.

The Latham Family resided on a portion of the land included in Desmond property. Mrs. Grace Latham and Mrs. Florence Latham Fleming of Madera are daughters of that family.

Mrs. Sue Schmitz has an oil painting in her home of the King of Bavaria, often called "Mad King Ludwig." This painting came into the Schmitz Family through Frank Schmitz, brother of J. W. Schmitz I. Frank is credited with doing some of the wood carving in the Palace Hotel.

The bed and dresser belonging to Henry Miller and used in his room at the Poso Ranch were his gift to Mrs. J. W. Schmitz I. The furniture is now in use at the J. W. Schmitz III home.

General Grant, when President of the United States, was entertained by J. W. Schmitz I at the old Chapman Ranch. President Grant was on his way to Yosemite.

We have no dates as to when J. W. Schmitz was in the Oakhurst area but he did operate a store there for a short time in what was then called Fresno Flats. Perhaps someone operated the store for him.

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Key to pictures on pages 5 and 6:

Page 5 - Top: Small pictures all taken at Chapman Ranch. Mrs. Schmitz standing in front of Chapman Home, Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Schmitz, lower left, and other two are work scenes on the ranch. Three photos at lower half of page are J. W. Schmitz II, J. W. Schmitz III, and J. W. Schmitz IV.

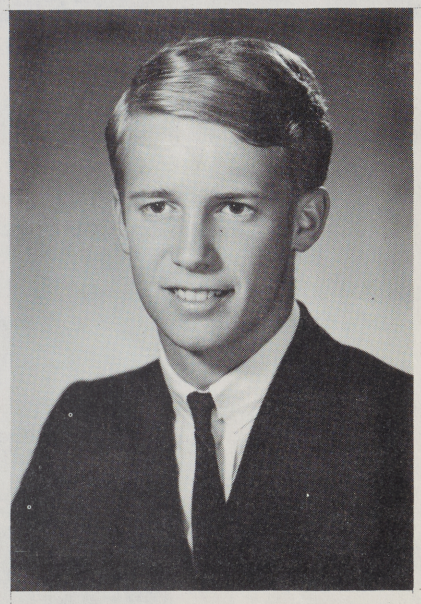
Page 6 - 1. Poso Ranch Home.
2. Picnic on Poso Ranch Home Lawn.
3. Thomas Desmond Home.
4. Thomas Desmond Home Remodeled.
5. Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Schmitz **II** on Old Timers' Day in 1931.

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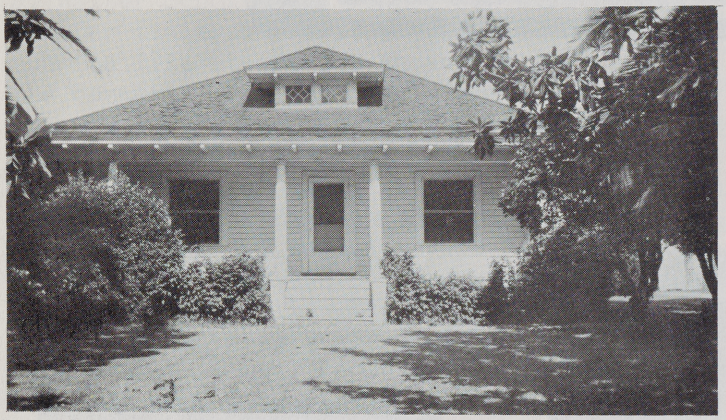
















MADERA COUNTY HISTORIAN

This issue, the last for 1966, also marks six years of publication. We are including a Table of Contents for all six years so you will have something to refer to, so it will not be necessary to go through all 24 issues to find the article you wish to reread.

We have about 100 complete sets if anyone desires to purchase them. The price on the entire 24 issues is $2.50 now.

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"An Early Trip to Yosemite" by Mrs. Muriel W. Sweet.
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"From An 1880 Diary" edited by Mr. and Mrs. H. Clay Daulton.
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"Historical Harvest Help - Foster's Hogue Ranch" by Doris and Clyde Foster.
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"Ho! For the Trails," an advertisement of Coffman and Kenney for trips to Yosemite.
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NOTES TO THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE
MADERA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Annual Meeting will be held on January 25, 1967. Notices will reach you two weeks in advance. This meeting is important. At this time we elect new officers, pay our dues, make plans for 1967, and it is your opportunity to express your ideas, ask questions and to know more about the Society and its function.

May we remind you your dues can be paid any time now for 1967. We have 300 members now. Everyone of us is a membership committee of one to get new members so let's get busy. Del Norte County has 800 members. Remember our dues are our sole income. They pay for printing the Historian and other expenses we have.

Landmarks Committee Chairman, Mrs. Mildred Eaves, recently sent a letter to all civic and service organizations requesting that they send in their desires as to the moving and relocating of the "Old China Store" now at the site of the Savage Monument. Many replies have come, all in favor of preserving the old store. Mrs. Eaves has written to the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers giving them the results of the letters.

Mr. and Mrs. Guy Crow, representing our Society, have attended all of the State Historical conferences and workshops for 1966. Their attendance has enabled our Board to keep informed on Historical Societies at the State level.

We who work in our basement headquarters are kept busy doing research for many who come in for information or for those who write in requests. The students of the Junior English Classes under Mrs. Wogaman also are coming in now to read, look at photographs, and examine artifacts that are stored in our two rooms.

The first edition of the Historian for 1967 will contain an up-to-date membership list and a financial report for 1966.

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